

MEETING OF TRUTH

"If the Slovene people decide to bring down their leadership, they will do it themselves. They do not need professional demonstrators from Serbia or anywhere else to do it for them."

(From my contribution to the debate at the Yugoslav Presidency session of 4 December 1989.)

In the months before my election Yugoslavia witnessed a series of pro-Yugoslav political rallies known as *mitingi*, with the catchphrases "yoghurt revolution" or "the people's time has come" being bandied around in Serbia. The backdrop to these rallies was the Greater Serbia policy led by Milošević, and they brought down the leaderships in Novi Sad, Titograd and Priština. The earlier, more federally-inclined leaders were replaced by new puppet leaders who served the Greater Serbia policy. Greater Serbian nationalism was on the march. In this way the Serbs wanted to change the established relations in AVNOJ Yugoslavia. Their argument was that in Tito's Yugoslavia, Serbia had been exploited and held back, while all the other nations had acquired a position of power far out of proportion with what they deserved. In their view

Serbia's real power and influence should have been greater, and for this reason the relations within the federation should be changed accordingly. The *mitingi* represented the darkest face of this policy and at the same time its tangible implementation. At that time the Serbs had under their control two republics – their own and Montenegro – plus the two autonomous provinces of Vojvodina and Kosovo, which were formally a part of Serbia, but which had previously enjoyed a considerable degree of autonomy and also a relatively autonomous political leadership. In this way Serbia controlled four of the eight federal units. That left, apart from Slovenia and Croatia, the two republics of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia. The question was only when and where this Serbian nationalism would continue its advance, and when and where it would strike next. A *miting* was scheduled for Ljubljana on 1 December, the date of the founding of the first Yugoslavia – the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes – and this represented a grave challenge to Slovenia. We had already watched with misgivings the earlier such rallies on TV. There was a great deal of resistance to it, mistrust was growing and along with it an increasing anxiety about the fate of the country. But the announcement of the rally in Ljubljana was of course something entirely different. This was considered to be the exporting of the Serbian yoghurt revolution to Slovenia. An attempt to destabilise Slovenia. This action was aimed at Slovene policies, and also represented a kind of counter to Slovene support of Kosovo in its conflict with Serbia. Along with the Serbian prohibition on the sale of Slovene goods in Serbia, the planned rally in fact represented the most direct inducement to some serious thought about the complete independence of Slovenia, and about secession from Yugoslavia. In this situation I found myself again in a very delicate position, similar to when the amendment to the Slovene Constitution was being passed. I was President of the Presidency of Yugoslavia and the Slovene representative in the Presidency. Put simply, I could not allow the Serbs to organise a rally in Ljubljana. But how could I stop it? I could not do anything myself. I could only act with a majority in the Presidency. If I had the necessary majority in the Presidency to pass a resolution banning the rally, we could even prevent it by repressive means, in other words with the police or even the JNA. We debated the Meeting of Truth, as it was called, at the session of the

Presidency on 21 November. I also invited to this meeting Janez Stanovnik, the Slovene president, to present the Slovene position. This was that the Slovene Presidency called for the rally to be stopped, and for the Presidency of Yugoslavia to oppose it. I was very much involved in this debate, but I was not able to obtain a majority of the Presidency to oppose the rally. The Serbian section of the Presidency had clear orders to defend it. The Serbs said that this was a spontaneous democratic form of expression of the will of the people, and that we could not and should not act against it. The others were worried, but it was difficult getting them to offer any open opposition to it. That day the Serbian Presidency and parliament had expressed public support for the rally. The media in Serbia and Montenegro, and also in Vojvodina and Kosovo, were making extraordinary efforts to support this "spontaneous democratic event". When the session of 21 November provided no result, I demanded a continuation of the debate in the session of the following day. At that session we dealt with a number of other things, including the economic situation and involvement in European integration. Then, as several times before, I was able to gain a very positive stance towards European integration, orientated towards membership of EFTA, coming closer to the European Community and membership of the Council of Europe. However, with regard to the confrontational situation that now directly threatened the democratic processes in the country and with this our European orientation, we could not find a consensus, or rather the required majority. The Serbs once again put their rock under the wheels of the wagon which should have carried us all towards democracy and Europe. The Presidency came up with some generalised, wishy-washy compromise resolution for the public. Given this situation, I decided on the same evening that as President of the Presidency I should make a public appearance. Via Tanjug and the other Yugoslav media I issued a statement which was directly opposed to the rally. I called on "all those who support the holding of such an uncompromising rally, above all its organisers, to withdraw from it". At the end of the statement I said that I wished to say this "because the announcement of the rally and the reaction to it has created a situation which directly threatens the efforts which I as President of the Presidency of Yugoslavia have invested in overcoming tension between our peoples, through the path of peaceful, tolerant and constructive dialogue." (***)text missing - page 126 ..., orientated towards the earliest...)

From the TV appearance: "The processes which are currently under way in Yugoslavia are running in various directions. Some are positive, and some are negative. And I don't know what the final outcome will be. But I could never agree that we should just give up. We must ensure that in these difficult times of change we will succeed in progressing towards democracy, economic success and integration with Europe." I spent the two days of holiday around 29 November in Ljubljana constantly on the phone. I spoke to Marković. I had already spoken to Milošević and Jović the day before in Belgrade. They both acted as though they were powerless to do anything, that this was the will of the people and so on. I also spoke to Kadijević about it on 29 November. He was angry at the Serbs and I called on him to use his influence to have the rally stopped, since otherwise the situation could get very nasty. He promised to do what he could. He got angry at those – he was clearly thinking of Milošević – who fostered these *mitingi*, and then went off for the holiday to their dachas, living the good life out in the countryside, while because of what they had done all the rest of us had a big mess to deal with.

On 30 November the Slovene Ministry of Internal Affairs issued a decree banning the rally. Finally there came a message from the organisers, that there would be no rally, that it was cancelled. So the Serbian demonstrators would not be coming to Ljubljana. The Slovene police were already waiting for them there, fully prepared, with instructions not to let them into Ljubljana, even if they did come. There could have been all manner of incidents and trouble. Quite what the main reason was for the cancellation, is hard to say. Was it my public call, given as President of the Presidency, or was it the formal as well as informal contacts I had with all the figures involved, both in Serbia and the federation? The Serbian organisers probably figured that the whole thing was getting rather risky, and that in the end they would earn themselves more minus than plus points. But they responded in their own special way. The Socialist Alliance of Serbia called for an economic blockade of Slovenia, for a blockade on all Slovene goods. They succeeded in further rocking the federation, even though they were in fact doing all of this in the very name of the Yugoslav federation. In this way they successfully helped to create Slovene "separatism". Right after the holiday, I returned to Belgrade. On 4 December we

continued the session of the Presidency. This, too, was confrontational and very sharp. I had some pretty strong words with the "Serbian coalition" in the Presidency. On the previous day, Zelenović had very clearly joined the demands for my resignation. Now the Serbs were demanding that the Presidency establish that the Slovene ban on the rally was unconstitutional. In spite of my opposition, this was passed in a vote. As far as the Meeting of Truth was concerned, it was an irrelevance, a waste of time. Perhaps it was thought up as a preparation for the next attempt, or as a further "intimidation" of the Slovenes. At this meeting I demanded that the Presidency condemn the Serbian blockade of Slovenia and called on Serbia to revoke it. Jović and Zelenović again attacked me, and tried to derail me. But I would not give up, and proposed that the Presidency call on the leaders of Slovenia and Serbia to meet and attempt to resolve this issue. These events have become deeply engraved in the memory of the Slovenes. With the threat of a violent rally in Ljubljana, and with the memory of similar rallies elsewhere in Yugoslavia, in which the previously more moderate leaderships had been removed, the Slovenes could definitely no longer feel comfortable in the Yugoslav federation. And the Serbs did in fact go a long way in implementing their announced economic blockade of Slovenia.